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SUBJECT: U.S.-EU COORDINATION ON TUNISIA: SHARED FRUSTRATIONS WITH TUNISIAN INTRANSIGENCE

REF: A. U.S.-EU DVC OF 9/6/2006 B. TUNIS 2408

¶C. TUNIS 2480 D. TUNIS 425 E. TUNIS 1565

Classified By: CDA David Ballard for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C/NF) Summary. In a September 27 meeting with Charge and Pol/EconCouns, European counterparts provided an update on the current EU thinking regarding Tunisia. There is a lack of EU consensus on approaching the GOT about blocked internet sites; that said, the EU may be interested in joint prison visits. The Europeans are frustrated with the lack of progress on the European-Tunisian Action Plan. Absent a firm push from Brussels, however, there is a danger of resignation, especially after the early-November departure of the headstrong and outspoken Delegation Head Marc Pierini.
End Summary.

GOT Interference, Harassment

¶2. (C) European Commission DCM Bernard Philippe and Finnish DCM (representing the EU Presidency) hosted Charge and Pol/EconCouns for a 90-minute coordination meeting, in follow-up to the segment of Ref A U.S.-EU DVC devoted to promoting Tunisian political reform (Ref A). The meeting began with an exchange of information about GOT harassment of and interference in the activities of the respective missions/member states. Charge shared with his EU interlocutors the non-paper that he left with MFA DG the previous week detailing GOT interference in U.S. Embassy activities and noted that talking points had been provided for use by U.S. officials meeting with Tunisian counterparts in Washington and New York (Ref B). (Note: We have separately shared these points with our British colleagues. End Note.) The Europeans offered their perspective on the GOT's most recent instance of such interference -- the GOT's blocking in early September of a European-sponsored conference on labor issues (Ref C).

U.S.-EU Coordination on Internet Access:
Going Nowhere Fast

¶3. (C/NF) Turning to issues for follow-up from Ref A DVC,

Charge shared with his EU counterparts Post's most recent list of key internet sites blocked by the GOT in Tunisia. Philippe welcomed the information but acknowledged somewhat sheepishly that, "Brussels is not fully focused on the matter." Noting internal EU differences over how hard to press Tunisia on human rights, he said it was not at all clear whether the idea of joint approaches to the GOT on access to internet sites would "fly." That said, Philippe did anticipate that outgoing Delegation Head Marc Pierini would raise the issue locally, in the course of his upcoming farewell calls on relevant GOT officials.

But There May Be Potential for Cooperation on Prisons

¶4. (C) The focus coming out of Brussels, according to Philippe, is on prisoners. Specifically, the Europeans in Tunis have been asked to report on the conditions of release of those 1600-plus prisoners who were granted amnesty in February 2006, including those, such as former An-Nahdha members, who were granted "conditional freedom" (Ref D). In addition, the EU wants to focus on prison conditions. On this point, Charge informed his interlocutors that, in a September 21 meeting with the Tunisian Ministry of Justice official responsible for Human Rights, EmbOffs had requested access to prisons for the purpose of reporting objectively on prison conditions in the annual Human Rights Report. Philippe asked to be kept informed of the status of this request, suggesting that joint U.S.-EU prison visits might be a possibility.

No Progress on European-Tunisian Action Plan

¶5. (C) Philippe complained of the "low intensity of rhythm" in the European-Tunisian dialogue on the European Neighborhood Policy's European-Tunisian Action Plan. (Note: In Ref A DVC, it was agreed that the USG would review the action plan to see where we might be of help. End Note.) He attributed part of the problem to the fact that the GOT had pulled back its previous Ambassador and had not yet appointed -- or even sought agreement for -- a new one. (Note: The Tunisian press continues to report that MFA Secretary of State Hatem Ben Salem is Brussels-bound, a story that he has denied in conversations with Charge. End Note.) In addition, Philippe speculated that the possibility of a GOT cabinet reshuffle has further contributed to the general slowdown in GOT-EU dialogue.

¶6. (C) Philippe acknowledged, however, that, at its core, the go-slow problem is one of substance. Of the 10 EU-Tunisian technical subcommittees, the one with the most "chronic" problems is the subcommittee on human rights. He said that this subcommittee was to have held its first meeting in July; the meeting did not take place. Moreover, there is still no agreement on the committee's terms of reference, specifically on whether the TOR will include the ability to raise specific cases. Noting that the similar problems the EU had encountered with the Moroccans on these issues had now been resolved, Philippe assessed that Tunisia is now "more isolated." Turning to the justice subcommittee and its languishing 22 million Euro assistance program to the Tunisian judicial sector (Ref E), Philippe lamented that, in the end, the EU may be reduced to simply buying computers for the Justice Ministry.

EU "Desperate" on NGO Funding

¶7. (C) Meanwhile, Philippe said that the EU has reached the stage where it is "totally desperate" regarding NGO funding in Tunisia. He cited the latest instance of GOT blocking of foreign funds for a Tunisian NGO, noting that the French NGO involved works solely on health issues. Having had the

matter brought to his attention, Foreign Minister Abdallah had promised to fix the problem, yet the issue remains unresolved.

Comment

¶8. (C/NF) European ambassadors on the ground are irritated by GOT intransigence; indeed, the Friedrich Ebert conference incident provoked some strong reactions among them. Even so, absent a firm push from Brussels, we see resignation and "confrontation fatigue" as a looming danger among our EU colleagues here. Marc Pierini represented a notable exception in this regard, frequently butting heads with the GOT, with or without full consensus from member states or Brussels. We wonder, who, if anyone, will be as energetic on behalf of EU concerns and complaints.

BALLARD